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XXII.—A LITERARY MOSAIC.

Nearly forty years ago Robert Browning issued *The Ring and the Book*, his longest and most important poem. It has suffered varied fortunes at the hands of the critics. Brooke, Dowden, Chesterton, and Herford, however, devote long and important chapters to its discussion, and acknowledge the poet's mastery in his subject. Amid critics friendly and hostile alike, the lawyers' monologues have perhaps suffered more than any other portion of the poem. They have been skipped by the ordinary reader as unmeaning and dull. Few open and intelligent words of defense have been uttered in their behalf. Chesterton puts the matter well (p. 160), "One of the ablest and most sympathetic of all the critics of Browning, Mr. Augustine Birrell, has said in one place that the speeches of the two advocates in *The Ring and the Book* will scarcely be very interesting to the ordinary reader. There can be little doubt that the great number of readers of Browning think them beside the mark and adventitious. But it is exceedingly dangerous to say that anything in Browning is irrelevant or unnecessary. . . . The introduction of them is one of the finest strokes in *The Ring and the Book*."

Why, then, did the poet create them? He certainly must have felt he had reason. The architecture of this poem was deliberately wrought, and Browning assures us that he saw the whole plan from the beginning. Did he blunder, then, in this portion of his work? These questions find a new reply in the light of the poet's source-book, which has been issued recently from the press of the Carnegie Institution. The poet's purpose and method in them become quite clear.

Browning's unique source-book, the treasure-trove of one of his days of wandering through the streets of Florence, is a collection of the original pamphlets of argument and evidence in the Franceschini murder trial in Rome, 1698. The volume was probably collected and bound by a lawyer, who regarded it as a technical legal precedent—a case. The machinery of the law and the lawyer's attitude of mind are therefore present on every page. In creating his poem from the old book, Browning has been conscientiously accurate to an unusual degree. Hence it is not strange that this ever-present fact of the law found place in the poem.

Browning has been called "subtlest assertor of the soul in song." The oft-quoted words from the Introduction to *Sordello* hardly need to be repeated in this connection. He was essentially a student of the human heart. In poem after poem this interest manifested itself, as in his wide readings he has caught glimpses of man. Not infrequently he has turned to strange and even monstrous personality, as in *Sludge* and *Caliban*. Hence when he read the pages of the old book, he probably felt an immediate, but ironic, interest in the men of the "patent truth-extracting process." They were the official representatives of law, and law is the colossal institution founded by man for sifting human right and truth. But Browning was always skeptical of institutions as against men, and he had no admiration for the custom- or institution-ridden man. The attitude of these lawyers, therefore, excited his strong dissent. He did not believe in their version of truth in spite of their profession. For he saw in their treatment of the facts of this sad page of human history abundance of cunning sophistry, of respect for authority and precedent, of insistent and minutely argumentative setting forth of certain technical aspects of the crime; but the real lawyers of the book showed no genuine love of truth nor any human concern for the rights and

wrongs of victim and criminal alike. In his purpose to present in turn the various aspects of the story, the poet could hardly have omitted the most characteristic attitude displayed in the volume before him without abandoning the conscientiousness of which we have spoken above. He therefore put forth the full power of his art to reproduce in his poem the legal bias as he had found it in his book.

There were four lawyers in the Franceschini murder trial, but these are necessarily reduced to two, one for each side of the case. Their professional type of mind is everywhere evident in the original arguments; their personal traits are but meagerly present. The poet accordingly takes over the former, but he must invent the latter outright.

The personal traits of the two lawyers thus invented may be regarded as representing the dual aspect of the legal mind as it revealed itself to Robert Browning, the comic and tragic aspects respectively. He laughs heartily at the grotesquerie of the logic, at the forced eloquence, at the pomp of precedent. This begets a Chaucerian mood of satire, which sees Arcangeli not merely as a pompous pleader, but as the devoted father to the eight-year-old curly pate and as the gourmandising prophet of the birthday feast. The fun of the invention is contagious. It lightens and humanizes the whole borrowed technical machinery of the "speech in the egg" which forms the body of the monologue. The poet shows no small skill in giving this interest of concrete personality to the dry, harsh professionalism with which he had grown familiar. It was the true creative breath upon a very dry valley of bones.

But when Browning stopped to think, he saw also the cruelty of this unsympathetic professionalism which had felt no pity for the dying Pompilia, whom he loved. His indignation was aroused. His irony was no longer playful, it became almost fierce; he scorned Bottini, he caricatured

him almost passionately. This was probably due to the actual Bottini's habit of making damaging admissions concerning Pompilia and then explaining them away by his sophistries. Browning was so thoroughly convinced of the innocence of Pompilia that he resented this, and grew unfair in his indignation. Hence he has invented the arrogant self-conceit of bachelor Bottini, trying his written speech "amorously o'er." This makes by no means as pleasing a monologue situation as the one invented for Arcangeli. Moreover, the fair reproduction of legal fact which is seen throughout Arcangeli's speech, gives way to scornful caricature in the second lawyer's monologue. Browning's anger with Bottini all but spoils his art in recreating him.

When Browning had decided to make the legal mind one of the psychological biases of his story, he must straightway have seen the impossibility of following any one of the eleven arguments given in the book. His creation must be eclectic, choosing salient features here and there. To forward this plan, he imagined Arcangeli uttering no completed speech, but sitting at his office desk getting up notes for one of his pleas for the defense. This gave opportunity for the desultory and incomplete statement of one point after another, and admitted the occasional introduction of

The jolly learned man of middle age,
Cheek and jowl all in laps with fat and law
A-bubble in the larynx while he laughs,
As he had fritters deep down frying there.

The speech in the making on Arcangeli's desk that cold January day is a remarkable composite, a skilful mosaic, made up of scores of fragments assembled from all parts of the old yellow book. Each of these is reproduced with painstaking exactitude. But the final design in which they are set is the poet's, and does not follow any connected line

of thought in the book. The ease and precision with which these parts fall into their places in the new design show how fully the poet had made the book his own. Nor will the unconscious memory explain all this treasuring of fragments; they were evidently sought out and copied from the book.

The facts of the Franceschini story used by Arcangeli, even the many minute and trivial facts, are taken from the book. Such are the swooning of Baldeschi, one of the accomplices, under torture (line 349); Guido's arrival in Rome on Christmas eve with his cutthroats (line 1071), and the confession of an after-plot to murder Guido (line 1598). The fact of the ridicule which Abate Paolo suffered, as told by Arcangeli (lines 764-74), reads as follows in the legal argument: "While he was prosecuting Guido's cause in the courts, it befell him that he excited the ridicule and the guffaws of nearly all sensible and honorable men, not to say of the very judges themselves." Notice that the word *cacchinos*, translated guffaws, is given as "cacchinations" by Browning. Such use of fact is the rule throughout much of the poem.

Still further, every point of law made in Arcangeli's monologue is drawn from the book. The main plea of *honoris causa*, so much emphasized in recent newspaper reports of sensational murders, is the chief plea in defense of the real Guido. This is turned in many ways in the monologue, but all of them are found in the actual record before the poet. In supporting this plea, Advocate Spreti says: "The aforesaid authorities unanimously assert that husbands are considered vile and horned (*cornuti*) if they do not take vengeance with their own hands, but wait for the judges to do this, who laugh at them scornfully." The word, "horned" from the original *cornuti*, Browning translates humorously "fronts branching forth a florid infamy." The poet in a spirit of waggery parodies rather than para-

phrases this part of the argument. Then follows the further discussion as to whether murder is justifiable only when done in immediate anger (lines 983-1056), all borrowed from the actual book. The discussion of the aggravating circumstances (lines 1108-1381) is taken entirely from the original arguments. These points of law transferred to the poem have first been condensed and are not infrequently steeped in humor. Thus in the argument concerning illegal arms, the real Arcangeli says, "it would have been the very same if they had been slain with the longest of swords, or with sticks or stones." Browning puts it (lines 1176-7),

“Then, if killed, what matter how?
By stick or stone, by sword or dagger?”

In his description of the Book, the poet ridicules the masses of precedent (I, 217-232):

"there heaped themselves
 From earth's four corners, all authority
 And precedent for putting wives to death,

 Solon and his Athenians? Quote the code
 Of Romulus and Rome ! Justinian speak !
 Nor modern Baldo, Bartolo be dumb !

Cornelia de Sicariis hurried to help
Pompeia de Parrioidiis : *Julia de*
 Something-or-other jostled *Lex* this-and-that ;
 King Solomon confirmed Apostle Paul :
 That nice decision of Dolabella, eh ?
 That pregnant instance of Theodorici, oh !
 Down to that choice example Aelian gives,"

Not only is every one of these precedents taken from the book, but every precedent mentioned in Arcangeli's monologue is drawn from the same source. Such are the "fructuous sample" from the Dutch Jurist, Matthaeus (lines 824-30), Sicily's decisions, 61 (lines 813-21), the case from Cæsar Panimolle (lines 1228-47), from Cyriacus (lines 951-

61), from *Castrensis* (lines 1541-7), and that of the Smyranean woman before Proconsul Dolabella as quoted from Valerius Maximus. The book, too, was put under requisition for the "choice example" (lines 512-18):

"Ælian cites, the noble elephant,
(Or if not Aelian, somebody as sage),
Who seeing, much offense beneath his nose,
His master's friend exceed in courtesy
The due allowance to his master's wife,
Taught them good manners and killed both at once,
Making his master and the world admire."

Its original statement is as follows: "Ælian, in his *Natural History*, tells of an elephant which avenged the adultery of the wife and the adulterer found together in the act of adultery." The citation from Farinacci concerning the torture of the vigil, which is closely paraphrased in lines 328-43, was referred to in the book, but the poet had to follow the reference to get the above text. This is the more interesting, as it shows the poet found here in Farinacci his knowledge of Guido's torture. Browning's humor plays with another of these citations in the lines 680-3:

"Saint Ambrose makes a comment with much fruit,
Doubtless my Judges long since laid to heart,
So I desist from bringing forward here.
(I can't quite recollect.)"

Arcangeli's numerous quotations from unusual authors are drawn from the same convenient treasury,—the Theodoric (lines 482-7), St. Jerome (lines 585-95), Gregory (lines 597-600), St. Bernard (lines 625-36), even including the pseudo-saying of Christ: *honorem meum nemini dabo*. The poet follows these even to the grotesque literality of lines 613-15:

"quia,—says Solomon,
(The Holy Spirit speaking by his mouth
In Proverbs, the sixth chapter near the end)"

taken from *come parla in questo proposto lo Spirito Santo per bocca di Salomone nei Proverbi al 6 in fine*. Only one quotation (aside from half a dozen fragments of the classics) seems to have been found outside the book, that from Scaliger's *Table Talk*, concerning the words *castae apes*.

To the casual reader, perhaps no feature of the monologue is more obvious than its abundance of law-Latin. Ninety-five per cent. of this Latin, in fifty-six quotations, varying from two to one hundred and ninety-eight words long, are taken directly from the source-book. Six mere scraps of Latin are drawn from classic sources, one from Aquinas, and two from unknown medieval sources. The fifty-six passages are drawn at random from all parts of the book, and must have been thoughtfully and precisely extracted from their context, and are not at all to be explained as mere chance feats of memory. The longest of these, the peroration (lines 1638-1737) is transferred from the close of the last and most important of the real Arcangeli's arguments. The poet has edited the book-Latin but slightly, supplying occasional antecedents for pronouns, exchanging synonyms for the sake of metrical convenience, excising useless portions, and occasionally changing grammatical forms, but on the whole, following the text before him with surprising closeness.

His running translation of these passages is worthy of attention. In general, it is a free, brilliant paraphrase, giving the sense but not the syntax of the original. Thus he translates *Ultra quod hic non agitur de probatione adulterii* "It is not anyway our business here to prove what we thought crime was crime indeed." The expressiveness of Browning's idiomatic English style far transcends his original. There are parts of this translation, however, where the poet's sense of humor rather than his good Latinity guides him, and many a characteristic thrust is made in this way. We have already cited his translation of the word *cornuti* above. The

opening words of Arcangeli's first argument, *nupserat sinistris avibus*, he renders

"He wedded,—ah, with owls for augury."

And the common expression, *igneae arma* for fire-arms, he renders "igneous engine." Or, as he adds,

"Might one style a pistol—popping-piece."

This is suggested by the word of Lamparelli, *sclopulo*. Still further, *excogitari potest* becomes

"From out the cogitative brain of thee."

The irony and humor of the poet play effectively through all his task of producing an English version of the book-Latin. No one can read the monologue with a full perception of its value without giving thought to these masterful niceties of translation.

Enough has been said to show the poet's painstaking accuracy in the use of the materials assembled for this monologue, yet his pains have not entirely freed him from error. He speaks of Panicollus for Panimollus (1228) and of Butringarius for Butrigarius (1542). The technical phrase *incontinenti* he makes *ex incontinenti*, probably in confusion with the contrasting phrase *ex intervallo*. *Quia* becomes *qui* at line 1241. The most evident error of all is his reading *ex iusta via*, which he translates "on ground enough," instead of *ex iusta ira*. These errors are, of course, accidental, and the poet avoided them as far as lay in his power.

It becomes quite evident, therefore, that Browning's impulse to create the lawyers grew from the very legal nature of his source-book, and that the poet who became interested in the strangely sophisticated type of mind shown there, turned to the book itself for the material of his fictitious legal arguments in the poem. For the first, he

assembled perhaps a hundred fragments from various parts of the book. These details seem so unvital and technical as to be apparently impossible material for the creative artist. But under his touch, they were wrought into a strange new device, just as the fragments of a mosaic lose their shapeless individuality in the larger unity of the whole. The wit, the humor, the satire of the poet serve as a cement to bind them all together. Browning's creative vitality has used the materials with an ease and precision which other artists show with purely fictitious material. He has thus produced one of his most entertaining studies of grotesque psychology. But still further he has made the legal mind as he found it in his book an integral part of the carefully wrought design of this, his master poem.

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